DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 186 860 CS 005 440

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TITLE The Relationship between Television Viewing and Reading Behavior.
PUB DATE May 80
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (25th, St. Louis, MO, May 5-9, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Children; Commercial Television; Educational Media; Literature Reviews; *Reading Achievement; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Interests; *Reading Research; *Television Research; *Television Viewing

ABSTRACT

The relatively few empirical studies that have concentrated on the relationship between television and children's interest and achievement in reading reflect two schools of thought. One group assumes a negative relationship, hypothesizing that time previously devoted to reading has been replaced by increased television viewing. Research in this area has produced uneven results, though there is hope that more sophisticated measurements and methodologies will ultimately reveal the true interaction between television and reading. The second point of view assumes a positive relationship between the two media and suggests that television can stimulate reading. Proponents of this viewpoint are supported by the general successes of "Sesame Street," scripting, and teaching critical television viewing skills in language arts classrooms. According to the research that has been examined, utilizing children's interests in media to teach basic skills in the home and the school now appears to be the predominant trend in education at this time. But this trend has raised concerns about giving the television medium more legitimacy than it deserves and about contributing to declines in the emphasis on print and the quality of reading materials. These issues, as yet to be explored in research, need to be examined to determine the extent of commercial television's usefulness as an educational tool. (RL)

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The Relationship Between Television Viewing and Reading Behavior

Running Head: Television and Reading

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The Relationship between Television Viewing and Reading Behavior

The effects of television viewing on young children's reading behavior have become an issue of growing concern among parents, educators and mental health professionals in the past several years. Recent popular publications (Larrick, 1975; Mankiewicz and Swerdlow, 1978; Winn, 1977) have attributed the decline in test scores, lack of concentration skills, and general disruptive behavior in schools to the increasing utilization of television. Authorities now estimate that young children between the ages of 3-5 view approximately twenty to twenty-four hours a week (Comstock et. al., 1978). Preschool children, according to Larrick spend more than 64% of their waking hours before the television set.

At this point, the cumulative effects of television viewing over time on achievement are not known, however, educators are beginning to speculate that it, indeed, has a powerful influence on achievement and the development of lifelong reading habits. Mankiewicz and Swerdlow (1978), in a series of interviews found many teachers discouraged

about children's lack of attention and unwillingness to delay gratification. One teacher reports that often she feels in competition with Sesame Street. "Whenever I start a project or a lesson, I have the children's attention for about two minutes...Unless I arrange for some sort of film presentation or slide show, I lose them." (pp. 219-220). Larrick agrees, stating that the children of television not only have shorter attention spans which discourage the development of reading, but seem to thrive on "noise, strife, and confusion."(p.7).

In contrast to the extensive research in the area of television and social behavior, relatively few empirical studies have concentrated on the relationship between television and children's interest and achievement in reading. Generally, two schools of thought can be identified. One assumes a negative relationship on the basis of displacement (Himmelweit et. al, 1958; Schramm et. al, 1961). The theory hypothesizes that the child, confronted with multiple leisure alternatives, will sacrifice those activities appearing to satisfy the same needs as television, only less effectively. Thus, the time previously devoted to reading, according to several observers, has now been replaced by increased tele-

vision viewing (Mankiewicz and Swerdlow, 1978).

The second point of view, however, assumes a positive relationship between the two media on the basis that television can act as a stimulus to read. Specific programs may encourage new interests in subject areas. Books featuring such television characters as Cool Cos and Mork and Mindy, for example, appear to motivate even low achievers to read more.

More than opinions, however, educators need to determine if, in fact, there is a relationship between television and reading achievement, and if, in some cases, television can be used effectively as an educational medium to teach reading skills. This paper will review research in the field of television and reading in an effort to determine the relationship between the two media.

The Relationship Between Television and Reading

Two major studies, one conducted in England by Himmelweit et. al (1958) and the other in the United States and Canada by Schramm et. al (1961), serve as an important introduction to an analysis involving television and reading achievement. Both studies sought to determine the impact of viewing on the patterns of daily living by comparing television and nontelevision communities over a period of

several years. Most of the data referring to media behavior were provided by questionnaires; other activities were based on diary entries. Sample sizes reported for the Himmelweit and Schramm studies were 4,000 and 913 respectively, with ages ranging from six to sixteen.

Each investigation revealed a rather similar picture: activities most influenced by the onset of television were other media, namely, comic book reading, movies, and radio. Outdoor play, bedtime habits, and the time devoted to homework were little affected. In regard to book reading, the British researchers found that children, when first beginning to view television, read significantly less than the controls. However, this pattern changed after a few years of viewing, with reading returning to its original level. Interestingly enough, this pattern has also been reflected in more recent analyses of television and reading (Brown et. al., 1974; Murray and Kippax, 1978).

Schramm related the unevenness of displacement with reference to the principle of functional similarity: television and other media all fulfill the need for fantasy, therefore they compete for a child's attention. Reading, however, is not displaced because it serves a different set of functions,

specifically, the need for information and reality seeking. The data support his theory: Television viewers tended to read half as many comic books as controls (3.6 in sixth and tenth grades in the television community; 7.9 in the control). Newspaper and magazine reading continued unaffected by the new media.

While Schramm's hypothesis is, in fact, borne out in his study, his interpretation remains unconvincing considering the number of "escapist" books children tend to enjoy. The results of these studies, however, do suggest that reading provides specific functions that are not met by television viewing alone.

The studies by Himmelweit et. al. and Schramm et. al. attempted to describe the influence of television when first introduced in a community. They did not determine the long term effects of television on reading behavior or achievement patterns over time. On may question how television viewing affects the lives of children today, twnety years since Schramm and Himmelweit reported their findings.

Witty, for example, reported the results of a study analyzing the relationship between television viewing and reading from 1949-1965. Television viewing habits were

assessed using logs which listed each program on the air. Reading achievement scores and reading habits were recorded for each student in the sample. He found that high achievers tended to view less frequently than low achievers. Lack of controls for other differences between high and low achievers, however, seriously limited any inferences regarding television's effects.

A number of other studies (Childers and Ross, 1973; Clark, 1951; Greenstein, 1954; LaBlonde, 1967; Quissenberry and Klasek, 1974; Ridder, 1963; Slater, 1965; Starkey and Swinford, 1974) have found no relationship between television viewing and reading achievement. Clark, for example, reported no differences in reading achievement in a sample of 1000 sixth and seventh graders. Childers and Ross (1973) analyzed the effects of televiewing with 100 middle elementary school children with grade point average as the dependent variable and I.Q., achievement test scores and week night television viewing as predictors. They concluded that there was no relationship between the two media.

These null findings, however, have related only simple measures of the time spent viewing with reading achievement scores. We have had, as yet, no systematic attempt to de-

termine how television's content affects the nature and quality of what is being read. Perhaps, new,more sophisticated measures of reading behavior will reveal an interaction between the two media. It could be that, in some cases, television might exert a beneficial influence by stimulating interest in a wider range of reading materials.

Television as an Educational Tool

In fact, the educational community has become increasingly intriqued with the possiblity of using television to foster reading readiness and stimulate reading behavior.

This trend is perhaps a result of the success of Sesame Street, developed in 1969 under the direction of Joan Ganz Cooney, President of the Children's Television Workshop. Sesame Street grew out of a concern for the early intellectual stimulation of young children, particularly those from low income homes. The general aim of the program was to provide supplementary educational experiences to young children preparing for school, as well as to encourage "a general appetite for learning." (Lesser, 1974). Through the use of a unique magazine format, which included 30-40 segments per program, humor, and music as attention getting devices, Sesame Street quickly became by its second season, the most popular children's program, with approximately ten million young viewers per day.

The initial enthusiasm for the program, however, has been tempered in recent years. Two major factors may be attributed to this phenomenon: one involves the evaluation of Sesame Street as a learning tool; the other deals with some major concerns regarding the Sesame Street format.

To measure the effectiveness of Sesame Street to teach cognitive skills, the Educational Testing Service (Ball and Bogatz, 1970), commissioned by CTW after its first year of production, conducted a study with 943 children ages 3-5 to test learning gains. Children were randomly assigned to a treatment or control group. The treatment group was visited by ETS field personnel on a regular basis. Parents were encouraged to watch Sesame Street with their children. In addition, they were given toys, books, and games designed to stimulate viewing. The children in the control group, receiving no special encouragement, were able to view or not, according to their own wishes. The results of the study showed significant differences in favor of the experimental group. In addition, the data showed that those who viewed the most, gained the most.

However, there were several confounding variables. The gains for the experimental conditions could have been due to the supplementary materials or the additional attention given the subjects. Furthermore,Cook et. al.(1975), in a re-analysis of the ETS data, found that when controlling for initial differences, the effects of Sesame Street were minimal. Their analysis

also suggested that Sesame Street might, in fact, be contributing to an increasing gap between advantaged and disadvantaged learners based on the fact that the advantaged group seemed to show the largest gains. Minton(1972), as well, found that theprogram produced gains only for the advantaged children.

The results, then,regarding the specific skills gained from Sesame Street are somewhat disappointing. However, what the Ball and Bogatz's research seems to suggest is that at least some percentage of the population under some conditions, can benefit in terms of improved cognitive skills. It remains an open question as to whether Sesame Street can teach these skills more efficiently or effectively than other learning materials or approaches.

The second factor relating to recent concerns about Sesame Street, involves the format of the program itself. The Singers (1980), for example, believe that the Sesame Street producers are creating a psychological orientation in children that leads to a shortened attention span, a lack of reflectiveness and an expectation of rapid change in the broader environment. The pacing of the program itself, they feel, may be stimulating an appetite for novelty and lively action, as well as the expectation that problems can be resolved in a very short space of time. Winn (1977) comments,

> It is a bit chilling to consider that the producers of the most influential program for preschool children employs modern techniques in the form of a 'distractor' machine to test each segment of their program to insure tha that it would capture and hold the child's attention to the highest degress possible.(p.55)

Goldsen(1978) reports that Sesame Street has taught children the fragmented hour. Children learn, for example, to piece together the day's drama, unifying it into a continuous story in spite of all the interuptions.

However, it should be noted that there is no research evidence to date which supports the claim that any possible negative effects of such techniques outweigh the positive learning benefit. In spite of these reservations, Sesame Street still represents a major attempt to use television as an educational resource.

The emphasis of programs such as Sesame Street, Mr. Rogers, Electric Company, and more recently, 3-2-1 contact, has been to use television as a resource to encourage educational experiences for children in the home setting. Another trend, however, has been to use television in the classroom as an educational tool.

Beginning with Solomon and McAndrew in 1973, the technique of "scripting", linking television and reading, appears to be a successful approach for motivating low achievers. Students, involved in the program, view television segments such as Gulligan's Island, Here's Lucy, etc... in the classroom, and at the same time, read along with the script. Word analysis and comprehension skills are taught as part of the lesson plan. After viewing the program, students have the opportun ity to act out episodes, or use scripts to produce their own version

of a scene. C.B.S. provides many free materials and services using this innovative technique.

The success of this approach has encouraged newspapers in several areas to print complete scripts of important television productions, such as Holocaust and Eleanor and Franklin. The attraction of television has brought unprecedented numbers of students to read along with literary classics.

Organizations including Prime Time Television and Teacher's Guides to Television, have developed lesson plan formats which suggest questions for discussion and related materials to aide teachers in coordinating classroom instruction using popular television programs. The viewing of Roots The Next Generation, for example, gave teachers and students the opportunity to discuss the reconstruction period, issues of discrimination, and the civil rights movement. When used appropriately, television can provide an added dimension to the teaching-learning process.

In addition, recent publications by Becker(1973) and Potter(1976) describe how television can be used positively to help children learn reading and comprehension skills.

Teaching critical television viewing is also becoming part of the language arts curriculum. WNET in New York has recently published a language arts "work-a-text' which is designed to help students in grades 5-9 develop analytic

and evaluative thinking skills as well as reinforce important language arts skills that are part of the curriculum. Students are taught many 'behind the scenes' facts such as analyzing technical production elements, putting a television show together, television advertising etc... By discussing these important elements, the authors propose that students will become more discriminating viewers.

Utilizing children's interests in media to teach basic skills in the home and the school now appears to be the predominant trend in education at this time. However, several important concerns need to be raised regarding this trend. For example, in using television as a teaching device, are we as educators 'throwing in the towel' and saying basically 'if we can't beat them, join them'? At this same time, are we, perhaps, contributing to the decline of the emphasis on print and to the quality of reading materials? These issues, as yet to be explored in the research literature, will determine the extent of commercial television's usefulness as an educational tool and as a resource for stimulating reading behavior.

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